

Fact Sheet: Protein

What is it? Protein is one of the major nutrients that the body requires in adequate amounts every day. Proteins are made up of 'building blocks' called amino acids. Many of these amino acids are essential – which means that our body cannot make them and they must be supplied from the diet. When a protein contains all of the essential amino acids, it is considered a complete protein. All animal sources of protein are complete. If one or more of the essential amino acids is missing, then the protein is considered incomplete. With the exception of soy protein, vegetables sources of protein are considered to be incomplete. But, two incomplete plant proteins can be complementary – one protein can provide the amino acid that the other one lacks and vice versa. This is how strict vegetarians are able to meet protein needs – rice and beans is a classic example of two proteins that complement one another to provide all the essential amino acids.

What does it do? Protein has many important functions in the body. One its primary roles is to build and repair muscle tissue. Many body functions rely on proteins, too. Hormones, which act as 'cellular messengers' are proteins, and enzymes – which help the body perform many of the chemical reactions that occur inside of the cells – are also proteins. These are just a few of the many essential functions of proteins in the body.

Why is it important? Simply put, protein is essential to life. Without adequate protein, the body would not be able to grow, or to repair everyday wear and tear on muscle tissue. We require these vital hormones, enzymes and numerous other specialized proteins made by the body in order to survive.

Where is it found? Protein is found in both animal and plant foods. Meats, fish, poultry, eggs and milk products are rich in protein, and good plant sources of protein include beans (such as soy, black, pinto, etc.) lentils and peas. Protein powders, made from soy, whey (from milk) or egg whites can also be added to other foods to boost protein content.

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